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ABSTRACT

The newness of the middle school poses five major planning problems; (1) the unfamiliarity with or misunderstanding of the rationale behind the school in the middle, (2) the "bandwagon syndrome" faced when any new development in education achieves public attention, (3) the training of a school staff that is intellectually and emotionally equipped to make the middle school concept work, (4) the willingness of school boards and administrators to accept program experimentation and on-going program evolution, and (5) the dangers of promising too much too soon in an organizational context that is extremely promising but largely untried. A related document is EA 003 235. (Author)

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AVOIDING THE PITFALLS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL PLANNING

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by

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It is difficult to name a single new development in American education which has gained so much interest, support, and implementation in such a brief span of years as has the middle school concept. In hundreds of school communities from Maine to California, the idea of the middle school evokes a receptive response.

Perhaps it is not too surprising that this is so -- that the middle school has struck a responsive chord in the hearts and minds of many educators and concerned laymen. First, it reflects a growing realization that our priorities in educational expenditure have been woefully misplaced, with the preponderance of public resources going to the secondary schools while those critical educational programs for younger learners remain seriously impoverished and neglected. As we come to know more about how we learn, it is becoming increasingly evident that continued investment of more and more dollars at the high school level will not correct the failures sustained by learners at earlier ages. Remediation is always an inefficient and inadequate process.

Secondly, the middle school concept <u>does</u> make some quite valid points regarding the unique nature of transescent learners, learners who are undergoing the disturbing effects of adolescence or pre-adolescence and who need the security of the elementary school while gaining confidence and skill through increased freedom and a broad exploratory learning program.

Thirdly, the middle school is, for not a few districts, a convenient solution to student housing pressures whereby overcrowded upper-elementary schools, junior high schools, and perhaps senior high schools can achieve reduced enrollment pressures through the creation of a new organizational unit combining grades and elements of all three.

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Fourthly, the concept of the middle school can be a useful tool in meeting the challenge of racial and/or social integration by bringing together student elements in a school community which might otherwise remain separated through the effects of crowded existing attendance centers and the problems of pupil transportation.

And fifthly, the middle school idea serves other political ends by allowing some districts to achieve a kind of instant innovation without much in the way of planning or educational commitment. By wrapping themselves in the middle school cloak of respectability, these districts hope to be perceived as progressively forward-looking, in step with the future. Since the physical facilities of the middle school will be highly visible (whether it be a completely new building or an older high school or junior high building which has been renamed the "middle school") innovation can be achieved without commitment to real change. What's in a name, after all?

Clearly, I am not saying that these are equally valid reasons for embracing the middle school. And for many of those districts which have adopted the concept or are considering its adoption, their motivations are essentially not those of a political or enrollment housing nature. But the middle school's departure from conventional organization and a general lack of experience in dealing with the development of this kind of school suggest that a number of pitfalls do exist to trap the unwary. Many of these planning pitfalls are those found in the planning of any new high school, elementary school, or junior high school. Others are unique to the planning of the middle school. And because we find more familiar and customary the planning of a new elementary school or a new high school, a discussion of planning problems to avoid in developing the middle school appears to me to be a way of encompassing some of the problems which should be avoided in planning the more conventional school housing units while allowing explicit treatment of the special problems in middle school planning.

Without question, the most serious pitfall in middle school planning is that of failing to understand what the middle school is all about. The middle school is not intended to be and should not become another junior high school in disguise. Neither is it an upper-elementary school or high school. In the words of William M. Alexander and confreres, the middle school should reflect.

> . . . a school . . . program planned for a range of older children, preadolescents, and early adolescents that builds upon the elementary school program for earlier childhood and in turn is built upon by the high school's program for adolescence. Specifically, it focuses on the educational needs of what we have termed the "in-between-ager", although its clientele inevitably includes a few children for whom puberty may arrive before or after the middle school period.[1]

[1]William M. Alexander, Emmett L. Williams, Mary Compton, Vynce A. Hines, and Dan Prescott, The Emergent Middle School. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968, p. 5.

How does this kind of school differ from the junior high school? The question cannot be answered categorically, as middle school programs differ in almost direct proportion to their numbers. But in broad outline the philosophy behind the middle school would suggest a great deal of individualization in the learning program if this heterogeneous group of students -- some preadolescents, some early adolescents, others older adolescents -- is to be accommodated. The conventional junior high school has mistakenly followed an inappropriate model, the senior high school, in assuming that a marked degree of homogeneity exists in its learning populations.

In keeping with its mandate to meet more directly the needs of these "in-between-agers", the middle school may also wish to provide greater opportunities for student exploration in a broad range of areas and activities -- areas and activities which have customarily been beyond the reach of the upper-elementary student and even the seventh- or eighth-grader. Greater attention to individual problems both of cognitive and affective nature would appear to be tasks for the middle school if learners are to be met at their own levels and on their own terms. It does little good and much harm to provide one professional counselor for every 300 students while the day-to-day problems and anxieties of preadolescents and adolescents go unaided and unresolved either because teachers assume that the counselors are handling these problems or because the counselors themselves are unaware of the problems or unable to devote time to their resolution. The middle school suggests the opportunity for a thoroughgoing restructuring of the entire counseling system, placing responsibility for individual counseling where it should always have been -- upon those teachers who have everyday contact with young people and who see them in the multivariate activities of the day.

The middle school concept further suggests the potential for humanizing education, for producing young people who have some understanding of themselves as well as of others. Our systems of education have seriously failed to address this problem, one which is clearly apparent in the problems of our society. Whether we choose to apply inaccurate and emotionally stereotyped labels to elements of this purpose such as sensitivity training, sex education, or human relations development, the need is clear. Our schools do an extremely poor job of producing good people. And the middle school, dealing as it does with young people undergoing quite traumatic changes from preadolescence to adolescence, is seemingly <u>the</u> critical stage for doing something positive and explicit about this problem.

Finally, the middle school idea, because it is not tied to a learning program which has become ossified and stereotyped through the years, offers opportunities for imagination to come into the schools. It may be desirable to do away with the traditional

departmental organization found in the usual junior and senior high schools. This might avoid some of the deleterious effects to education common in departmentalization: poor communication and lack of cooperation across subject fields, empire-building and nonproductive competition between departments for resources and personnel irrespective of learner needs, and the tendency to view the learner as a segmented person who becomes in turn a "social studies student", a "mathematics student", and a "language arts student" all within three class periods.

However you choose to define the educational program for the middle school -- and the very newness of the term permits a great degree of freedom as the expectations of the public, of teachers, and even of the students themselves have not become fixed -- it is absolutely essential that the idea of the middle school be clearly understood. It is not the same set of ideas which motivated the creation of junior high schools or high schools. The middle school should be designed for relevance to the needs of students undergoing physical, social, and intellectual change at a very critical stage in their maturation. If the middle school becomes in your school district just a jazzy name for what you have always had, if it means sticking a few disjointed concepts and practices together which sound good (for instance, "Why don't we have a little team teaching, put some TV sets in the building, and distribute some programmed texts?") without really contributing to the goals of the middle-school youth, then the middle school will have failed. It will have failed not through lack of sound ideas but through failure to think and plan carefully at the local implementational level.

A second pitfall in planning the middle school, not unrelated to the first, is the failure to carry out a careful evaluation of the need for a middle school facility. Don't let enrollment figures dictate the decision in favor of the middle school. A survey of the reasons for the establishment of middle schools recently revealed that the most common reason reported was that of remedying crowded conditions in other schools. Neither should efforts at racial or social integration be the prime considerations in deciding to implement the middle school. Of course, the social integration of our society must be a major goal in education and overcrowding is not in itself a bad reason for seeking solutions through the middle school. In my view, however, these should not be the primary reasons for choosing the middle school. If they are, I would guess that the middle school <u>as a middle school</u> will fail. If the main reason for creating a middle school is simply to house students in a way which is politically acceptable to the public, then the unique contributions which a middle school program can make will probably be overlooked. When the prime motivation in adoption of the middle school is one of political or social expediency, the danger is very great that the middle school will exist in name alone and that the internal commitment to funding and operating the school as it should be operated will not be forthcoming. On the other hand, an honest recognition of the need for the

middle school approach coupled secondarily with recognition of advantages deriving from solution of housing or integration problems would not, I think, be an unacceptable response as long as educational purposes were kept in the forefront of planning. The distinction may appear exceedingly fine, but I think it is one of critical importance.

Thirdly, it is frequently evident that many board members and administrators do not understand the importance of developing a viable structure for facility planning. The planning of a middle school or elementary school or senior high school is not a simple process. It cannot be done alone by the architect, nor can it be really well done without the architect, the teacher, the parent, the administrator, and believe it or not, the learner himself. A workable planning structure is essential if any educational facility is to function well. Planning should not deal solely with the physical structure itself but with what will happen inside and around that structure for the years to come. It should address itself to educational program first, with the development of building design as an outgrowth of program parameters. Planning must deal with the long-term future of programs and facilities, not simply with the immediate and the imminent.

Specifically, when I speak of a viable structure for planning I am referring to a functional organizational pattern whereby teachers, administrators, board members, citizens, consultants, architects, and students may share in the tasks of planning. In my experience, the primary planning group (that is, that group given responsibility for overall coordination and finalization of plans prior to approval by a board of education or similar group) should be kept small. Representational democracy is wonderful but carrying the concept to extremes by making every department head, every building administrator, and a number of central office personnel members of the primary planning team overburdens the process and reduces what small opportunities do exist for imaginative responses to difficult problems. Probably no more than four or five people should compose this primary planning group. If possible, the number should be even smaller. This does not imply that many others will not be involved, but rather that their involvement may come through meetings with the primary planning group or through discussions at departmental, building, or community levels. Without question, only the most able and aware individuals at your disposal should receive appointment to this critical planning task force. How they go about the process of planning, their timetable, their methods of receiving information and disseminating findings will vary with local situations. But in view of the rapid changes we are witnessing in education, they should be encouraged to think boldly and creatively.

Fourthly, this planning structure must receive the full and evident support of the administration and board of education if it is to achieve success. Where school district leadership is

lukewarm about the planning process, where there is lack of confidence in the judgment and ability of the primary planners, staff members perceive this lack of support in a thousand small and often nonverbal ways and do not themselves feel willing to commit themselves to something which their hierachical superiors distrust.

Fifth, allow time for planning. It cannot be done well in one or two weeks. A major pitfall in the planning of educational facilities is the tendency to expect immediate results. Good planning involves the careful gathering of evidence, the development of priorities, the consideration of options or alternatives. Most important, planning involves changing people. If planning has been fruitful, those involved in the planning will not come out the same people who entered into the process. They will have modified some of their ideas and prejudices. This requires time to think, to reflect, and to shift position. No rule of thumb can suggest the amount of planning time required, but I would suggest that at least one year be set aside for planning the middle school. It is the best investment a district can make in attempting to get everything it needs out of a facility later. The time devoted to good planning now will pay dividends later by reducing construction change orders, by bringing the staff along with the design concepts, and by providing a truly functional learning environment. Since educational facilities should be designed to accommodate the learning program, it is the delineation of that educational program which will more likely be the most arduous intellectual task faced by staff and administration in years. The development of educational specifications to guide the architect once the educational parameters have been described is a relatively simple task -- at least far easier than that of conceptualizing the kind of learning activities which will take place in the learning environment.

A sixth facility planning pitfall applicable not alone to the middle school is the failure to involve the architect early in the planning process. The architect can benefit by learning as early as possible of the learning goals and methods to be employed in the proposed facility. Educators can benefit by gaining the architect's experience and advice as to what kinds of spaces would be appropriate to the learning tasks or in assigning approximate square footages to various learning environments. Further, the architect may help educators avoid costly mistakes by proposing alternative types of spaces which may do the job just as well. These are all good reasons for school districts making an early selection in architects and involving them to some extent in the entire process of planning. They should not intrude upon the legitimate decision areas of education. However, they can be extremely useful in discussing the architectural advantages and disadvantages of ideas suggested for the middle school. They can and often do prepare rough sketches which permit the staff to better

visualize their educational ideas. Architects frequently have a broad experiential background in school design and can bring the practices of other school districts to the attention of your planners.

A seventh planning pitfall is the failure to develop meaningful educational specifications for the new middle school. The facility planning process should eventuate in a rather detailed educational specifications document to guide the architect in his planning. Advocacy of educational specifications is far from new. Students of educational planning have long suggested the wisdom of developing educational specifications. Yet, it is surprising how many school staffs proceed on the assumption that a three-page outline of what they want or a few meetings with the architect can define the kind of facility they need. Whether educational specifications are developed directly by the primary planning group or as an outgrowth of that group's activity, they have the advantage of committing to black and white the goals of the middle school, the processes of education which will take place within the facility, and detailed descriptions of spatial relationships within the facility, the type and number of spaces to be provided, and the equipment to be accommodated or furnished. Educational specifications provide for educators a specific mandate to the architect by which schematic and preliminary drawings can be compared. They provide architects with detailed information as to the programs to take place within and around the structure and any special requirements which he must meet in achieving an architectural solution. From the standpoint both of educators and architects, good educational specifications are those which use down-to-earth descriptions of learning activities and avoid meaningless catch-phrases or vague statements of philosophy. Educational specifications prevent misunderstandings and contribute to a more functional learning environment. Yet, most school planning still takes place in the absence of such a critical process.

Another pitfall in planning the middle school is the attempt on the part of educators or board members to impose architectural solutions. This occurs when a board of education or administration becomes insistent that a school plan which has been used elsewhere be adopted with perhaps only minor modification or when educators or board members begin to play architect by suggesting that <u>their</u> sketches be used as the basis for design. Architects subjected to these procedures may not always feel that they are in secure enough position to object strongly. Unfortunately, they sometimes do bow to such pressures instead of being able to develop an architectural solution tailored to specific program requirements of the district.

A pitfall which occurs all too frequently in the planning of educational facilities is that of forgetting about the site. Its consideration is often an afterthought to the building itself rather than as an integral element in the planning process. We should be at a point in our thinking today where outdoor education has come to play an equally important role with indoor education. Why is it that we still assume that all learning must take place within four walls? In the planning of middle schools, there are almost always opportunities for the creative utilization of building site to enhance the educational program. The design of a new 1250-student middle school for Marquette, Michigan, will feature a ski-slope with simple rope tow, an outdoor skating rink, a golf range, a running track, tennis courts as part of the vehicle parking area, and a large multi-purpose playing field. Few senior high schools in this country can boast these kinds of outdoor learning facilities. The wooded site as well as its water resources will be retained for outdoor study and use by students and teachers in a variety of ways. Here is another reason for (1) careful educational planning through a viable planning structure, resulting in detailed educational specifications, and (2) early involvement of the architect. Where site selection has not been made, the planning process can suggest those site characteristics which should be considered in making a site choice.

Perhaps one of the most crucial pitfalls that can beset the unwary is the failure to prepare teachers, students, and parents for a new kind of experience such as the middle school and the failure to build-in resources for change and adaptation after the building is occupied. We can no longer assume, if once we could, that the program which we develop for a new educational facility will remain the same for years to come. People have to be prepared to use a new facility just as they must be equipped to change that program later. This might mean a vigorous in-service program to prepare teachers for the operational format of the new middle school one, two, or three years prior to building occupancy. It may also mean a program to initiate lower-grade young people into the mysteries of the middle school as well as their parents.

As for equipping the staff for further change once the building is on-line, it is unlikely that everything envisioned in the way of program will prove workable or desirable once it is tried. We are going to have to be much more tolerant of experimentation in school, not necessarily the conventional model of scientific experimentation but the rough and disorderly cut-and-paste, try-and-modify, start-over-again approach, of which more is needed in education. Perhaps it is not too unrealistic to suggest that the new middle school may not have one consistent and unified program in mathematics or science or the

social studies. Rather, we may wish to see competing instructional teams attempting to test workable new techniques and materials in the same building. Some members of the public are beginning to question why educators continue to teach in one basic mode when they admit they do not yet have the answers to effective learning. Competition, which has been applied by educators to students and their learning efforts, has not been used by educators amongst themselves in attempting to develop better learning programs. Given appropriate rewards, competition can be an extremely powerful technique for improved performance and better ideas. If only one good idea results from the process, it has paid for its trouble.

These suggestions mean budgetary provisions whereby educators can be freed from their daily schedules at appropriate times to modify their programs or develop new ones. It may mean funds for the employment of outside consultants where necessary. It most likely means money for new materials and equipment which may not have been visualized at the start of the planning process. It certainly requires a willingness on the part of the administration and board of education to encourage change and to take some calculated risks in improving the functioning of the program and facility.

Another pitfall in the planning of the middle school is that of allowing one's priorities and purposes to be lost in the confusion of conflicting claims for instructional television, individually prescribed instruction, computer assisted instruction, programmed learning, or whatever else is getting the current play in The Reader's Digest and The Ladies Home Journal. The curriculum of the middle school should reflect a unity of purpose and relevance. The word "curriculum" originally designated a race course, from the Latin currere meaning "to run". There are still many students today who believe, with good reason, that their curriculum is a run-around. If instructional television will truly be a part of the middle school curriculum, by all means plan for it. If dial access information retrieval systems are essential or even desirable in the context of the learning program planned by your staff and such systems have a very good chance of being used and of being used successfully, they should stand high on your list of priorities. But many of the concepts discussed today in education are not really options for most districts. Computer assisted instruction may sound good in the local paper, but it is not an operational reality today. PPBS systems (planning, programming, budgeting systems) are not operational realities in any but a handful of school districts in the nation. Individually prescribed instruction is still a highly experimental program and a long distance from becoming a part of the day-to-day programming in American schools. Computer assisted instruction, individually prescribed instruction, and planning-programming-budgeting systems are constructs, not constructions. They are promising concepts, but they are not much

more than simply that -- a concept. Before one can say that individually prescribed instruction is an operational reality, someone will have to take the concept of IPI and translate that concept into behavioral objectives, pretests, posttests, outlines, guides, programmed materials, tapes and the thousands of items of curriculum materials needed for specific learners in specific learning areas. Instructional television, some elements of programmed instruction, and team teaching are more nearly operational realities but they will become meaningful realities only in those contexts where they make a significant contribution to human learning. Just because District "X" uses television in its program is not sufficient reason for your district to do so. Educational programs are different as are the financial resources of districts, which is another valid reason for requiring a different ordering of priorities between districts. This is not to say that any proposed educational facility should not be planned with utmost flexibility and provision for any conceivable hardware and software developments. Every school should provide tray systems, in-wall conduit, and terminal connectors for future inclusion of electronic systems. The cost is insignificant.

But whatever decisions in planning are made regarding new techniques in learning should be made with realism. If one opts for an extensive programmed instruction curriculum, understand that this will currently mean that the local district will be required to devote considerable staff talents and funds to the writing and testing of programmed materials. If the decision is made to use the computer in controlling the presentation of programmed materials (assuming that these are already in-being) and the recording of the learner's responses, understand that the cost at the present state of the art will much exceed more conventional instruction. I am concerned that the potential good which constructs such as these can perform is frequently distorted by an unrealistic assessment of the resource commitments required. The cause of educational improvement is not served by a desire to latch on to the "latest thing", impress the voters, or deflect public attention from the true quality of education, to name only some of the possible motivations for what I might term quasi-innovation.

And this brings me to a final pitfall in the planning of the middle school. Don't oversell the middle school and what it will do. It is a new and largely untried concept. There is the temptation on the part of teachers, administrators, and board members to become enthusiasts, promising themselves and others more than can be delivered. The result of such practice is obvious: public disappointment followed by community disenchantment. And lest we mistakenly convince ourselves that educational evaluation is too esoteric and mysterious an enterprise to be applied to our systems of learning, remember that the man-on-the-street is continually evaluating educational performance. Every defeat of an operational millage or bond proposal is a concrete example of educational evaluation taking place in our communities.